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SUBJECT: CENTRAL THAILAND: CHART THAI PATTANA PARTY NO LONGER THE ONLY GAME IN A NOW PLURALISTIC REGION

REF: A. BANGKOK 2587 (THAILAND, S LOWER NORTHEAST)

[1B.](#) BANGKOK 2385 (STRENGTH OF THAI DEMOCRACY)

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Classified By: POL Counselor George P. Kent, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[¶1.](#) (C) As the breadbasket of Thailand and gateway to the north, the central Thai heartland has long played an integral role in shaping Thailand's political and economic destiny. That remains the case to this day. With large swaths of the North and Northeast dominated by the opposition Puea Thai party, and a sizeable chunk of the South under firm Democrat party control, central Thailand has emerged as one of Thailand's key political battlegrounds in the lead-up to the next round of elections, which must be held by the end of 2011, with many pundits predicting in 2010. Puea Thai and the ruling Democrats have moved to exploit the decline of the Chart Thai Pattana (CTP) party -- the traditional political power in central Thailand -- while the new Phumjai Thai party has taken steps to establish a toehold as well. As with politics throughout most of Thailand, central Thai voters identify far more closely with individual politicians than with national political parties per se.

[¶2.](#) (C) The majority of Thai in the central provinces of Nakhon Sawan, Uthaithani and Chainat are involved in rice production, a fact that helps shield them from global economic shocks and which also serves to shape a less active political culture than in many other regions. Nonetheless, the same "red-shirt" and "yellow shirt" divide that has gripped Thailand over the course of the last three years plays out in central Thailand, albeit on a smaller, less pronounced scale. Although these central Thai "red" and "yellow" supporters are engaged in a struggle which takes the oxygen out of most of the rest of the local political discourse, they reside on the extreme ends of the political spectrum, while the clear majority of central Thai lie somewhere in the middle.

[¶3.](#) (C) Comment: Former Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa,

long-time Chat Thai leader (now known as the Chart Thai Pattana party), once enjoyed a virtual monopoly on power in large parts of central Thailand. Though that monopoly no longer exists outside of his home province of Suphan Buri (known in Thai political circles as Banharn Buri), he still retains considerable influence in the region. In the absence of his complete control, however, former Prime Minister Thaksin's Puea Thai, the ruling Democrats, and even Newin Chidchob's coalition partner Phumjai Thai have all moved in to try and capitalize on Chart Thai Pattana's decline. The results suggest that not only will central Thailand play a pivotal role in the next election, but also that no single political figure will be able to consolidate power in central Thailand like Banharn once did anytime soon. End Summary and Comment.

NAKHON SAWAN -- UP FOR GRABS

¶4. (U) We traveled to the Thai provinces of Nakhon Sawan, Uthaithani and Chainat, which collectively constitute the heart of central Thailand, December 8-9. Nakhon Sawan, with a population of just over one million people and seven MPs, is the largest of the three and is probably best known as the province in which the Ping and Nan rivers converge to form the Chao Phraya. Uthai Thani and Chainat each have only two MPs.

¶5. (C) Presently the Democrats and Chart Thai Pattana each hold two of the province's seven parliamentary seats, while Puea Thai, Phumjai Thai, and the smaller Pracharaj parties each hold one. It is, in other words, a fairly wide open and politically pluralistic province; according to Nakhon Sawan

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Governor Kawee Kittisataporn, it will likely remain that way for the foreseeable future. Governor Kawee told us he suspected the parliamentary breakdown was unlikely to change substantially in the next election.

¶6. (C) Nakhon Sawan Sub-district Chairman Pricha Chanwikran told us the Democrat party had taken strides to improve its prospects in the next election, though he conceded that winning an additional seat nevertheless constituted a serious challenge for the party. In his view, PM Abhisit's stimulus project had been very popular in Nakhon Sawan, while the province had largely been spared any impact from the economic downturn thanks to the steady demand for the province's rice.

¶7. (C) Chairman Pricha believed that the Puea Thai party was far and away the most energetic participant in the money politics game in the region, a fact that he believed could help the party to add a seat or two in the next election. Pricha was aware of rumors that the Phumjai Thai party had been leveraging its control of the Ministry of the Interior to help its electoral prospects throughout the country (REF A), but he told us he had seen little evidence of that in Nakhon Sawan. Phumjai Thai had made multiple attempts to recruit some of the province's leading political heavyweights, he added, but those efforts had thus far been unsuccessful and he doubted the party would be able to add to its one seat there.

POLITICS OF PERSONALITY IN UTHAI THANI

¶8. (U) Uthai Thani province -- best known for its vast national parks -- lies just to the southwest of Nakhon Sawan; despite having a comparable area, it boasts a population of only just over 300,000 people. As a result, the province has only two MP seats, both of which are currently occupied by Chart Thai Pattana party members.

¶9. (C) In Thailand, it has long been said that most elections turn on personalities far more than on political party platforms or even ideology. One of Uthai Thani's MPs, Chada

Thaiset, is in many ways a walking personification of this maxim. A first term parliamentarian and former mayor of Uthai Thani, Chada looms large -- both literally and figuratively -- over the entire province. Chada is tall and imposing, combining considerable charisma with deep pockets (his family owns a construction company), as well as an apparent zeal for retail politicking. We met with him at his house in Uthai Thani on December 8 just before his rushed departure for a funeral in the province (one of several in the day). Chada proudly told us that he was a member of Chart Thai Pattana, a party that by his own admission had lost considerable influence in the province but nevertheless held Uthai Thani's only two parliamentary seats thanks mostly to its affiliation with Chada.

¶10. (C) According to members of Uthai Thani's provincial People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) movement, aka the "yellow shirts," Chada used more than charisma and skill to keep the Chart Thai Pattana party relevant in Uthai Thani. PAD coordinator Ekkachai Tochokphaisan told us December 9 that Chada wielded so much power that he could pick and choose candidates for virtually every local provincial election. When prospective candidates ran afoul of Chada and dared to run for office without his blessing, they risked injury or even death, he alleged. According to several members of the PAD, Chada had ordered the execution of his enemies in the past, and intimidation had become his most effective political tool.

¶11. (C) Uthai Thani Political Development Council Chairman Nimit Tosatcha seconded the PAD's account of Chada, characterizing him as a veritable "strong man" in Uthai Thani. He alleged to us that Chada ran drugs in and out of the province, and he suspected he funneled all infrastructure

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development funds through his family's construction business. That all said, Nimit told us he still believed that Chada was an effective parliamentarian, and he suggested Chada derived his popularity less from his intimidation techniques and dirty money than from his charisma and actual talents as a politician.

PHUMJAI THAI MAKES ITS MOVE IN CHAINAT

¶12. (SBU) If Uthai Thani represents one of the Chart Thai Pattana party's last strongholds outside of Suphan Buri province, Uthai Thani's neighbor to the southwest -- Chainat -- highlights the Phumjai Thai party's ability to take its show on the road and win seats far away from its natural home in the Northeast. Chainat province, with just over 350,000 residents, has just two parliamentary seats. One of the seats is occupied by Commerce Minister and Phumjai Thai representative Ponthiwa Nakhasai, while the other is currently held by Puea Thai MP Chaiwat Sapruangthong.

¶13. (C) Phumjai Thai, under the stewardship of party godfather Newin Chidchob, has embarked upon an ambitious effort to use its control of the Ministry of Interior to expand its influence nationwide and engineer an expansion of its ranks in the parliament (see reftel). By most accounts, the effort has been only modestly successful outside of the northeast, and even there the evidence suggests Phumjai Thai may only add a handful of seats in the next election. One of the few bright spots on the electoral map for the party outside of the northeast appears to be Chainat, where it controls one of two seats and is optimistic about its chances of adding a second.

¶14. (C) Former Chainat MP and Senator Nanthana Songpracha made political headlines in July when she defected from the CTP party to Phumjai Thai, leading to a temporary chill in relations between the two coalition partners. Nanthana's father and brother were both politicians, another example of a local political baron family. Nanthana was found guilty of

vote-buying by the Election Commission following the last round of elections and issued a red card, forcing her out of parliament, though the charges were subsequently dropped in court. As a result, Nanthana is eligible to run in the next round of elections.

¶15. (C) Nanthana is a lively and expansive interlocutor, and she told us cheerfully December 9 that she had jettisoned CTP in favor of Phumjai Thai because of the refreshing difference in culture between the two parties. Banharn ruled CTP with an iron fist, she claimed, there was little room for dialogue or idea exchanges, let alone dissent. According to Nanthana, Phumjai Thai was a different animal entirely; she could easily pick up the phone and offer Newin and other party luminaries her unsolicited advice. She said she finally decided to jump ship after she saw how Chainat MP and Commerce Minister Ponthiwa Nakhasai had been allowed to run the Commerce Ministry with virtually no interference from the party, something that would never be possible in Chart Thai Pattana's party structure. That said, she conceded that at the end of the day money politics was a determining factor in most key decisions.

¶16. (C) Anuson Nakhasai, the Chief Executive of the Chainat Provincial Administration Organization, told us that Nanthana's defection effectively made the next election a three person race for two seats. Nanthana remained enormously popular in Chainat and would seemingly be in good position to win back her seat, he predicted. Phumjai Thai had scored a major victory by securing her services, and according to Anuson, most impartial observers believed they would soon control both seats.

RED AND YELLOW CONFLICT PLAYS OUT ON THE MARGINS

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¶17. (C) Nakhon Sawan, Uthai Thani, and Chainat are in many ways provincial microcosms of the red-yellow dynamic that has been playing out on the national stage for three years now: hard core red and yellow loyalists occupy the outer edges of the political spectrum while the clear majority of the population in each province resides somewhere in the middle of the two extremes. This dynamic -- which flies in the face of the conventional wisdom that every Thai is lined up on one side or the other of the red-yellow divide -- has been documented in polling conducted by the Asia Foundation and other polling outlets (ref B).

¶18. (C) Yellow shirt leaders in Uthai Thani deployed many of the same talking points we have heard in Bangkok for months. They told us the divide between the two sides was all but intractable and that the only way the conflict could be resolved would be if the red shirts first agreed to stop their protests unilaterally. They conceded that the red shirts were unlikely to stop protesting voluntarily without the government first making some major concessions, and they further conceded that they would quickly "take to the streets" in the event of a Puea Thai victory in the next election. In other words, they saw no obvious end to the vicious circle of protests and disputed elections by both sides.

¶19. (C) On the subject of the red-yellow divide within Uthai Thani, yellow leader Ekkachai Tochokphaisan told us that the two groups had yet to clash, though both groups avoided patronizing businesses run by members of the opposing camp. Ekkachai believed there were more yellows in Uthai Thani, but he volunteered that the majority of the province was agnostic when it came to the red-yellow question. Ekkachai told us that with most Uthai residents actively involved in the rice cultivation business, there was little in the way of idle time for most residents to get involved in politics.

¶20. (C) Not surprisingly, Chainat red-shirt members parroted

much of what their red colleagues in Bangkok typically have to say about the nature of the red-yellow divide. They highlighted the grievances and injustices they believed Thaksin and his supporters had suffered over the course of the last few years, arguing that Thaksin and his allies had long been handicapped by a system of double standards. For example, the yellow shirts shut down airports with impunity on one hand, while the government met red shirts protests with repeated use of the Internal Security Act (ISA) on the other.

¶21. (C) Chainat UDD leader Khun Kai, who operates a wedding dress store in Chainat, told us that he believed the vast majority of Chainat residents were sympathetic to the red cause, if not always necessarily active in red protests. He said 20-30 Chainat residents traveled to each and every red protest in Bangkok. When we noted that such a low number seemed to suggest a relatively modest level of red activism in the province, he agreed that most people chose to steer clear of the conflict publicly.

JOHN